

Speaking up for Israel: Revisionists need revising

by [Arnold Jacob Wolf](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

Some 25 years ago I met with three major spokesmen of the Palestine Liberation Organization in my capacity as chair of Breira, a Jewish group supporting a two-state solution for Israel/Palestine. Two of the three PLO leaders were soon assassinated. My own life was threatened more than once by the Jewish Defense League. A commitment to peacemaking can be dangerous for those on either side of a conflict.

About the same time I addressed a rally at the United Nations in support of Middle East justice and peace. I began by saying that I held nothing in common with those who oppose the creation of a Palestinian state. Nor, I added, had I anything in common with those who deny the right of Israel to exist. The first statement was followed by cheers, the second by boos.

Rosemary and Hermann Ruether's *The Wrath of Jonah*, now out in a new edition, reminds me of those reactions. It is a brilliant defense of the Palestinian cause, as one would expect from so able a theologian and a student of international issues. With much of it I agree: the agony of the Palestinian people and their betrayal by all the adjoining Arab states that shed crocodile tears at their many defeats; the brutality of Israeli policy, especially under the criminal hand of Ariel Sharon; the need for the United States to do more to resolve the conflict than fund Israeli militarism with some \$3 billion a year of military and other support.

But I am distressed at the Ruethers' lack of a parallel concern for the welfare and safety of Israel in the face of Palestinians' homicidal bombing, and the Palestinian silence in the face of Ehud Barak's offer of a (less than adequate, to be sure) notion of coexistence. Where is the concern for the natural fear on the part of Israeli families living amid those who have declared that they want Israel obliterated? Consider the Ruethers' summary of the last century:

Zionism has been the major antagonist of the Palestinian nationalism, because the Zionist ambition to plant a Jewish state in Palestine demanded

that a rival Palestinian nationalism be liquidated. . . . The main line of Zionist leadership, Weizmann and Ben Gurion, Meir, Begin, Shamir, Peres and Rabin, believed that there was room for only one national movement, the Jewish national movement, in Palestine. These leaders have rejected both binationalism and a two-state solution. They have sought to prevent a Palestinian state from emerging in any part of Palestine west of the Jordan, hoping to expand into most of this area themselves and to attach any residue of land in Palestine that they could not control to another Arab state, originally to Jordan. Moreover, they have hoped that most of the Palestinian people could also be removed from the territory of the Jewish state and attached to Jordan or some other Arab state, thus disappearing as a national community.

This version of history is, at the very least, one-sided. Even if one concedes that the Zionist movement wholeheartedly supported the removal of non-Jews from the Holy Land (a view that would be hard to substantiate, though it is not hard to demonstrate for some Jewish leaders and some occasions), what about Arab riots, the Arabs' refusal to admit any refugees from Hitler's Europe, and the accusation that Jews were mere invaders, though some of them had lived in Palestine for centuries and had been a majority in Jerusalem for decades.

Again and again *The Wrath of Jonah* (the title alludes to the Jewish prophet's unwillingness to obey God and forgive the Gentile Other) sees hard truth from only one side, thereby falsifying it. The Ruethers' updated bibliography makes much use of the revisionist school of Israeli historians which rejects the notion that the Jewish settlement in the Holy Land was a mere return of a people to its own unpeopled land. But where is the Palestinian equivalent of revisionism? Where are the dissenting Arab spokespersons who see the mote in their own people's eye? The work of a loyal Palestinian-American who happens also to be a first-rate scholar, Rashid Khalidi, is here unmentioned, as is anything written by Fouad Ajami or Bernard Lewis, scholars who see dangerous trends in Arab fanaticism. Christians need not fear that, because of the Shoah, they have no right to criticize Israel. This journal itself has made a habit of doing so—sometimes, in my view, unfairly or prematurely. But to see the present situation as a matter of good vs. evil is to render compromise utterly impossible. Here is the latest word from the Ruethers:

The real quest for peace that goes beyond truthful knowing to genuine caring, to real commitment to a solution that gives some modicum of a

just and tolerable life for Palestinians with Israelis, still remains. It lies finally, we believe, in the hands of Israeli Jews themselves, who have to decide that Palestinians cannot be “removed.” They are their neighbors, and they have to live not just alongside them but with them as fellow humans, neighbors, and finally extended family. We put the onus on the Israeli side because they have overwhelmingly been the aggressors. Palestinians have offered their concessions (the two-state solution within the 1967 borders). A genuine response by Israel must be based on a recognition of just coexistence as the minimal condition for “peace” and “security” for both peoples in relation to each other.

Israel must do what the Ruethers say it must do. But what about the other side? Everyone knows about Arafat’s tyrannical duplicity. Everyone has seen teenagers in Tel Aviv and kibbutzniks in the Galilee murdered in cold blood, and not just settlers in a beleaguered and illegal Judea and Samaria. Is there nothing to be said about what the Palestinians must do if there is to be peace? How can Palestine ever be free if Israelis are not relatively safe?

And not only Israelis. Jews all over the world are now in mortal danger from anti-Semitic violence, only mildly condemned and briefly noted by official Christian bodies. I recently heard Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Catholic spokesman most responsible for relations with the Jews, a decent man and a fine theologian, regret the outbursts of violence in France and Italy against innocent Jews, but add, “What could you expect?” considering Israel’s brutality.

There should be no mitigation of anti-Jewish murder, any more than the attack on the World Trade Towers can be mitigated by American confessions of “imperialism.” No one can win freedom by shedding innocent blood. It is not only Israelis who must learn that lesson, but also their many would-be tutors in righteousness.

I have been reading the collected (if repetitious) works of Marc Ellis, Rosemary Ruether’s favorite Jewish “theologian.” I agree with Ellis, too, about the wrong turn in Zionism and Israel politics. But I resent his use of biblical and modern Jewish sources (not rabbinic and mostly banal) to promote a one-sided criticism of Jewry and Israel. One does not have to be a Zionist in order to be a friend of the Jews. But one does have to see Israel with as much clarity and perspective as one would any other political entity. Israel is not South Africa; it is a land of two peoples, as Martin Buber told us long ago. And as Buber also said: because of the Holocaust, we reentered our

homeland through the wrong door. But it is our home as well as that of the South Syrians who have learned to see themselves as Palestinians.

Ellis is wrong when he claims in *Practicing Exile* that rabbis have failed to question Israeli policies. I am not the only rabbi who has often preached against Israeli violence or who saw the New York bombing as a question addressed to an America that had sent bombs around the world while hoping to remain safe itself. Rabbis have not been silent. We never have been. We are, to be sure, divided and chastened by events. But we did denounce the Israel-aided massacres at Sabra and Shatila to some effect. We have welcomed Palestinian scholars and activists to our pulpits. We met with those who later died at the hands of their more intransigent brothers. We have created more than one Jewish peace movement in the U.S., about which Ellis says nothing.

Reinhold Niebuhr was not the only great Protestant theologian who called himself a Zionist. He knew what was wrong with all political ideologies, their inclination to self-justification and the exploitation of others. But Niebuhr believed that relative justice and relative peace were possible. In 2002 I fear that Israelis want peace without much justice (for others) and Palestinians want justice (for themselves) without much peace. But after much bloodshed may come some mutual understanding. Jews will have to give up any hope of holding on to the West Bank. Palestinians will have to surrender their hopes of driving the Jews into the sea and inheriting all of the Holy Land. God knows, even if we do not, that none of us is still innocent, but that none of us is entirely doomed either.